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The Unknown Pages of a Heroic Raid

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The heroic and, at the same time, completely tragic two-week raid in February 1943 by the Southwestern Front's cavalry, which began the liberation of the Ukraine, remains essentially obscure to this very day. Soviet historiography of the 1941-1945 war says little about the organization and course of the raid, and it has not paid fitting attention to the losses suffered by the cavalymen. I have touched upon this and related issues through the prism of studying about general officer losses in the war, in general, and during the raid, in particular.¹

The raid was carried out by forces of the 8th Cavalry Corps, which consisted of the 21st, 35th, and 112th Cavalry Divisions.² The corps commander, Major General M. D. Borisov, was an experienced military leader who had participated in the Great Patriotic War from its very beginning and was instrumented in the Soviet victory at Stalingrad.³ Thereafter, the cavalry corps operated under Southwestern Front control as Soviet forces drove the Germans westward from the Stalingrad region and the great bend on the Don River. Then, in February 1943, the corps was designated to lead the Soviet assault south of Voroshilovgrad into the Donets Basin region. In accordance with the Soviet command's offensive concept, the employment of the cavalry as a deep raiding force was to have facilitated and accelerated the advance of the Southwestern Front's main forces into the Donbas region.

Having discovered a weak link in the enemy's defenses southeast of Voroshilovgrad [Lugansk], on the night of 8 February, the cavalry penetrated the front lines, entered the operational depths, and began a deep raid against the enemy rear area in the region of the large rail center at Debaltsevo. Debaltsevo was an important communications center for the entire enemy Donbas grouping. At first, the cavalry force was successful. It reached the Debaltsevo region and inflicted great losses in personnel and equipment on the enemy. According to archival documents preserved by the corps, the raid into the rear area of the German Voroshilovgrad grouping cost the enemy a total of more than 12,000 soldiers and officers lost and 28 tanks, 70 motorcycles, 50 guns, 35 mortars, 54 machine guns, 2 armored trains, 1 fuel train, 20 locomotives, 1 train with tanks, 3 trains with vehicles, and 1 train with aircraft destroyed. In addition, 6 communications centers were destroyed, 3 railroad bridges were blown up, up to 30 warehouses with ammunition and foodstuffs were burned, and the main rail lines leading to Debaltsevo were blown up in 56 places.⁴ Furthermore, during the raid, on 14 February the raid, the corps was transformed into the 7th Guards Cavalry Corps, and its 21st, 35th, and 112th Cavalry Divisions became the 14th, 15th, and 16th Guards Cavalry Divisions, respectively.⁵ The order doing so was transmitted to the corps headquarters by radio.

Having fulfilled their assigned missions, the cavalry began to return from the raid. It was at this stage of the operation that the corps was fated to experience several utterly tragic days. Documents and materials, in particular notes written by participants and eyewitnesses of these events, are now available to document the course of this raid. These have been collected in a thoroughly professional manner over tens of years by the workers in the Museum of Combat Glory in Krasnyi Luch (Lugansk *oblast'*). They represent a rich and exceptionally valuable collection of materials about the Debaltsevo raid.

According to notes among the recollections of General M. D. Borisov, the corps received the mission from the Southwestern Front, which was commanded by General N. F. Vatutin, to advance through the villages of Ivanovka and Iulino No. 2 and reach the Shirokii Farm region, located several kilometers from the front lines. Then the corps was to attack eastward, penetrate enemy positions, and reach the safety of *front* main forces' dispositions. To facilitate the fulfillment of the corps' mission, the plan required *front* formations to deliver a meeting blow in the Shirokii Farm region to link up with the withdrawing cavalry force. However, this attack by *front* forces failed to materialize, and, therefore, the cavalymen had to penetrate the enemy positions independently. While doing so, they suffered extremely heavy losses in intense fighting.

The situation was further complicated by the fact that the cavalymen were already out of ammunition and were burdened by many wounded. During the course of a terrible battle which continued for more than 24 hours in the steppe region in and around the villages of Iulino No. 1, Iulino No. 2, Fromandirovka, and Shirokii, the cavalymen were subjected to attack by all types of enemy weaponry. Only a small number of the Soviet soldiers survived the fighting and succeeded in linking up with Red Army main forces. About one thousand soldiers and commanders and several hundred horses remained lying on the bloody field of battle. Soon after, local inhabitants buried all of the soldiers who perished in combat in common graves in the steppes. During this battle, Major General M. D. Borisov, the corps commander, was captured; Major General S. I. Dudko, the deputy corps commander, Colonel I. D. Saburov, the corps chief of staff, Colonel A. A. Karpushchenko, the corps commissar, and Colonel A. N. Sarbai, the corps chief of communications, were killed; and Major General M. M. Shaimuratov, the commander of the 16th Guards Cavalry Division, also fell into enemy hands.

Valuable information can also be found in the Lugansk museum about the circumstance surrounding S. I. Dudko's and M. M. Shaimuratov's deaths. For example, Fedor Golovaty, an inhabitant of the village of Shterovka, which is located several kilometers from the site of the cavalymen's battle, left a particular lucid account of the action.

According to Golovaty, at first light on 23 February 1943, capitalizing on the fact that bullets were not whistling through the village and shells were no longer exploding (since the front lines now passed 2-3 kilometers east of the village), he left his house with a pail to fetch water from a watering trough. While walking along the streets, Golovaty glimpsed six horsemen clad in white sheepskin coats. Riding up to Golovaty, one of them asked whether there were any Germans in the village? At that very moment, a burst of enemy automatic weapons fire resounded, one of the riders immediately fell from his horse, and the remaining horsemen turned back while firing from their automatic weapons. A "dappled blue-gray horse" remained near the fallen soldier. The

Germans tried to catch it but failed. Then they exhausted the horse in a mine gallery [a horizontal mine exit], and they shot it. The rider, who had fallen from his horse, lay dead in the middle of the street. Golovatyι saw the Germans approach him and remove his fine sheepskin coat. A star was clearly visible on the collar of the dead man's military jacket, which meant a general officer's rank. According to Golovatyι, the dead man was a very handsome 40-45 year old man.

On the following morning, Golovatyι once again went to the watering trough for water. To his complete astonishment, he saw that the general's body was completely naked, and someone had fully removed his clothing and felt boots. Immediately, his attention was drawn to an old scar on his neck and on one of his legs, and there was also a large old scar below his knee. With the Germans' permission, that day the local inhabitants buried the man in a single grave in Shterovka, in a *balka* [ravine] near Romanov rock. There he remained until many years after the war, without any indication of family name or patronymic, although all in the village were sure that it was the grave of a great Soviet commander.

During the early 1960s an official commission made up of two professors and two colonels from Ufa, the capital of the Bashkir Republic, arrived in Shterovka to establish the place of death and the burial site of their fellow-countryman, M. M. Shaimuratov, who was a Bashkir by nationality. While visiting the grave of the unknown general, but without having examined the necessary materials, the commission reached the mistaken conclusion that M. M. Shaimuratov was buried in the grave. They even inscribed an inscription on Romanov rock, which read, "Here lies the remains of General M. M. Shaimuratov."

Several years later a new commission arrived from Bashkiria to re-bury the general in Ufa. His remains were taken from the grave and placed in a galvanized coffin, which, temporarily, pending receipt of official permission for reburial from responsible authorities in Moscow, was located in one of the factory warehouses in the town of Petrovskoe, located several kilometers from Shterovka. However, the answer arrived from Moscow, "Reburial of the remains of the unknown general in Bashkiria is forbidden." Consequently, the general's remains were transferred to a common grave containing cavalymen who had died during the withdrawal in the Debaltsevo raid. The remains of hundreds of Soviet soldiers, which had brought together here during the postwar period from many common graves and individual graves, were buried in this common grave in the town of Petrovskoe.

Subsequent investigative work, however, permitted the following conclusions to be reached. Fedor Golovatyι was shown enlarged photographs of Generals S. I. Dudko. M. M. Shaimuratov, and also Major General I. T. Chalenko, the commander of the 7th Guards Cavalry Corps' 15th Guards Cavalry Division. Golovatyι identified the photograph of General Dudko as the officer he had observed being buried at this site. Soon the investigators succeeded in getting in touch with Dudko's wife, Evdokiia Ivanovna. From her it was determined that her husband actually had wounds on his neck and legs. The first of these he had received from a Makhnovite sabre (during the Civil War in Ukraine) and the second from a broken leg which he had received during a fall from a horse in the 1930s. Thus, the exact site, time, and circumstances of S. I. Dudko's death were finally successfully established. The USSR Ministry of Defense's Main Cadres Directorate received all of this new information in 1967.⁶ Then the exact site of General S. I. Dudko's burial

was officially established, based upon information which the Main Cadres Directorate had not before possessed.⁷

In addition, we can now also finally and fully document the details of General Shaimuratov's death. While returning from the daring raid, the 16th Guards Cavalry Division had joined in terrible battle in the vicinity of the village of Iurino No. 1. The division commander, Shaimuratov, was severely wounded in the bloody encounter and was taken prisoner by the Germans and the Don Cossacks who were serving the Fascists. Having expelled its owner, the enemy brought Shaimuratov to one of the peasant houses in Iurino No. 1. The monsters then subjected the general to horrible torture; they put out his eyes with bayonets, they carved a star on his back and on his shoulders - as shoulder straps, and they cut off his sexual organs. The captured cavalymen, among whom was Shaimuratov's adjutant, buried him, in the presence of the owner of the peasant hut where they tormented the general, within the walls of a stable in the village, since while the battle was going on, bullets were whistling about, and it was difficult to find a more appropriate place for his burial.

Many years after the war, the owner of the peasant hut (who is today deceased) and Shaimuratov's adjutant provided the details about those tragic events. Today, the general's remains repose in a common grave in the town of Petrovskoe in Krasnyi Luch *raion* of Lugansk *oblast'*. By order of the USSR Ministry of Defense's Main Cadres Directorate, M. M. Shaimuratov was removed from the Armed Forces officers' cadre list, in light of his short-term tenure as prisoner of war, as having perished on 23 February 1943, that is without indication of the exact circumstances of his death.⁸ It would have been more correct to have removed him as having been tortured to death in Fascist captivity.

Undoubtedly, considerable work is still required to clarify all the reasons for the destruction of the 7th Guards Cavalry Corps during the course of the initially successful Debaltsevo raid.

ENDNOTES

¹. Editor's note. For additional details on the course of the Debaltsevo raid, see M. S. Dokuchaev, *V boi shli eskadrony*[The squadrons went into battle], (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1984), 35-59 and Kent A. Larson, *The Debaltsevo Raid: A Case Study in the Role of Initiative in Soviet Operational Art*, unpublished manuscript prepared for the School of Advanced Military Studies, US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS. Undated. The former is the history of the 7th Guards Cavalry Corps, and the latter is a superbly detailed study of the operation, which exploits both the 7th Guards Cavalry Corps history and a wide variety of German archival sources. Ultimately, the Germans employed the 17th and 6th Panzer Divisions and the 62d Infantry Division, all under XXXXVIII Panzer Corps control, to defeat the Soviet cavalry corps. Although the 7th Guards Cavalry Corps was virtually destroyed in the operation, the daring cavalry raid was instrumental in forcing the Germans to abandon the key city of Voroshilovgrad^{BACK}

². In addition to the cavalry divisions, the corps included the 148th Mortar Regiment, the 263d Separate Cavalry Artillery Battalion, and the 8th Separate Antitank Artillery Battalion.^{BACK}

- ³. General Borisov had been assigned command of the cavalry corps in fall 1942 and led it in during the Stalingrad counteroffensive, when it cooperated with 5th Tank Army in the encirclement of German Sixth Army at Stalingrad. [BACK](#)
- ⁴. *Tsentral'nyi arkhiv ministerstva oborony TsAMO* [Central archives of the Ministry of Defense], F. 3475, Op. 1, D. 1., L. 2, 3. [BACK](#)
- ⁵. *Ibid.*, L. 3. [BACK](#)
- ⁶. Materials in the files of *GUPRK*, formerly the *GUK* [Main Cadre Directorate] of the USSR's Ministry of Defense. [BACK](#)
- ⁷. From the personnel file of Major General S. I. Dudko (*GUPRK*) and information from the *GUPRK* published in *Voenno-istoricheskii zhurnal* [Military-historical journal], No. 11 (November 1992), 20, which mistakenly states that the 7th Guards Cavalry Corps was assigned to the Voronezh Front. [BACK](#)
- ⁸. From the personnel file of Major General M. M. Shaimuratov (*GUPRK*). [BACK](#)